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## TransCanada Chapter 2014: Using the past to create the future

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# Using the **past** to create the **future**

John Fogarty CSSp, Superior General

**M**argaret Silf, one of my favourite writers, tells a marvelous little story of one day taking a walk in the woods and coming to the banks of a fast-flowing river, knowing that she must cross to the other side, but not knowing how to do so. As she stands on the river bank facing an uncertain future, a Christ-like figure comes towards her carrying a large stone and places it in front of her in the river, inviting her to step forward. Each day he brings another stepping-stone and Margaret gradually moves precariously towards the other side.

God can continue to accomplish wonderful deeds through the lives of simple, committed Spiritans who are aware of their limitations, but who are open to the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. God's power is most effective in our human frailty.

One day she looks around and sees where the stones are actually coming from — he is systematically deconstructing her cozy little cottage on the shore in order to turn it into stepping stones for her onward journey. He is using her past to create her future. He is asking her to let go of all she thought she couldn't live without to reach toward something she thought she could never attain.

We are aware that we owe much to the past, to those who have gone before us. Their vision, their courage and their generosity brought us to where we are today — to the brink of yet another new departure.

We celebrate the legacy of those who have gone before us. In spite of their limitations they inspire us on our journey and

we seek to emulate their zeal, commitment and self-sacrifice. Our future is born out of that past.

God provides what we need as we move forward together, as we listen and discern together, as we listen to God in prayer and let God speak to us of the directions we should take if we are to carry out his mission in fidelity to our call as Spiritans.

This process may mean that we will be invited to let go of things that we hold dear — commitments that have served us well in the past, but no longer answer to today's needs; personal plans and convictions that ultimately are not life-giving for us or for the people we are called to serve.

## **The fragile yet firm foundation of our faith**

We risk stepping forward into the unknown, into uncharted terrain on the fragile yet firm foundation of our faith and trust in God and in each other.

The term "fragile" has become commonplace in our Spiritan vocabulary of recent years. We have become much more conscious of our limitations and our inadequacies in different parts of the globe for a wide variety of reasons — the experience of diminishing and ageing personnel, the lack of young people who wish to identify with our way of life in countries where Spiritan vocations once flourished, inadequate financial resources to meet even basic needs, disunity and division among members, the realization of our mistakes and of our failures as groups or individuals to live our missionary religious vocation authentically.

All of this is compounded by the fact that the church itself has lost much of its credibility as an authoritative source of hope and direction for others — financial scandals, internal political intrigues in the Vatican, the clerical sex abuse crisis

Perhaps the most appropriate biblical model for Spiritan mission today can be taken from the prophet Zechariah: “In those days, ten people of every language will take a Spiritan by the sleeve and say, ‘We want to go with you, since we have learned that God is with you.’”



across the globe, the failure of church leadership to address the matter with often disastrous consequences for those involved — all these have undermined the validity and effectiveness of the church’s voice in contemporary society.

### Fragility and powerlessness

We are being invited to embrace a sense of mission based not on strength, as perhaps in former times, but one rooted in fragility and powerlessness.

Born in fragility, our Congregation has known many fragile moments in its history. It began with a small group of seminarians gathered together one Pentecost Sunday with very simple aspirations. Their young charismatic leader, Claude Poullart des Places, would be dead a short few years later. Without a formal rule or official existence for three decades, the Congregation was later suppressed and restored on two separate occasions between 1792 and 1816. Subsequently deprived of essential funding, its buildings seized by the French army, it only survived due to the extraordinary dedication of a handful of its members.

The Holy Heart of Mary Society, which was ultimately responsible for its revival, was equally fragile. Founded by seminarians and led by Francis Libermann, a young convert of fragile health with no hope of ordination at the time, it saw its initial missionary venture to West Africa end in disaster.

The challenges met by Libermann as he tried to deal with tensions in the community, doubts about his competency as a leader, difficulties in communication, the untimely death of

several of his most committed and competent confreres and extremely limited resources, are often forgotten today.

No wonder Libermann spoke readily of his “poor and weak Congregation”: *“All in all we are a poor lot, brought together by the Master’s will, which alone is our hope. If we had powerful means at hand we would not accomplish much good. Now that we are nothing, that we have nothing and are worth nothing, we can form great projects because our hopes are not founded on ourselves, but on him who is all-powerful.”*

God accomplished wonderful deeds through the lives of simple, ordinary, committed Spiritans, who were aware of their limitations, but open to the transforming power of the Spirit. The mission we are called to is God’s mission, not ours. Our role is simply to be instruments at God’s service.

Working for reconciliation has little credibility if our own communities are divided and in conflict.

There is a growing realization that mission today has much more to do with the quality of our lives as individuals and communities than with the multiplicity of our activities. Mission today is much more about who we are than what we do. *“Your principal preaching consists in the holiness of your own life,”* wrote Francis Libermann. If there is a perceptible gap between what we preach and the way we live, our credibility is seriously undermined. Unfortunately, this is a reality with which we are all too familiar in recent times.

## Discovering joy, hope and meaning

A missionary, in the first instance, is a person who has discovered joy, hope and meaning in his or her own life and is able to put words on his or her experience for others.

So, the importance of the ongoing mission of our retired and sick members cannot be overstated. An over-identification of mission with activity and accomplishment often results in a sense of uselessness among those who for reasons of age or health can no longer function as they did when they were younger and more active. In the contemporary world, where human beings tend to be measured and valued by their ability to produce and consume and where the elderly are often isolated and forgotten, the importance of the witness of older and ill religious missionaries living in community and accepting their limitations and sufferings with joy, dignity and grace cannot be overstated.

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As St Paul was to learn from his personal experience in ministry, fragility is integral to our vocation as Christians: *"We carry a treasure in earthen vessels so that the surpassing greatness of the power may be from God and not from ourselves"* (2 Cor 4:7). We are simply called to place all we have and all we are at God's disposal.

## Our mission at this point in time

God comes to us and calls us in our concrete situation, not as we were in the past or as we would wish to be today or in the future. American theologian and author, Sr Sandra Schneiders makes the challenging remark: "For effective ministry, a Congregation does not need any more members than it has." Our task is to discern the mission to which we are called at this particular point in time, in the light of our charism as Spiritans, in the context of the local church and given the resources, both human and financial, we have at our disposal.

I am convinced that the single biggest challenge facing us in secularized Western Europe and North America is the communication of hope, meaning and joy. We are reminded of the prophetic words of Vatican II: *"The future of humanity lies in the hands of those who are strong enough to provide coming generations with reasons for living and hoping."*

In the final analysis, perhaps the most appropriate biblical model of Spiritan mission today can be taken from the prophet Zechariah: "In those days, ten men of every language will take a Spiritan by the sleeve and say, 'We want to go with you, since we have learned that God is with you.'" ■

# An evening to





# welcome John Fogarty

